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LONG ISLAND Parenting NEWS

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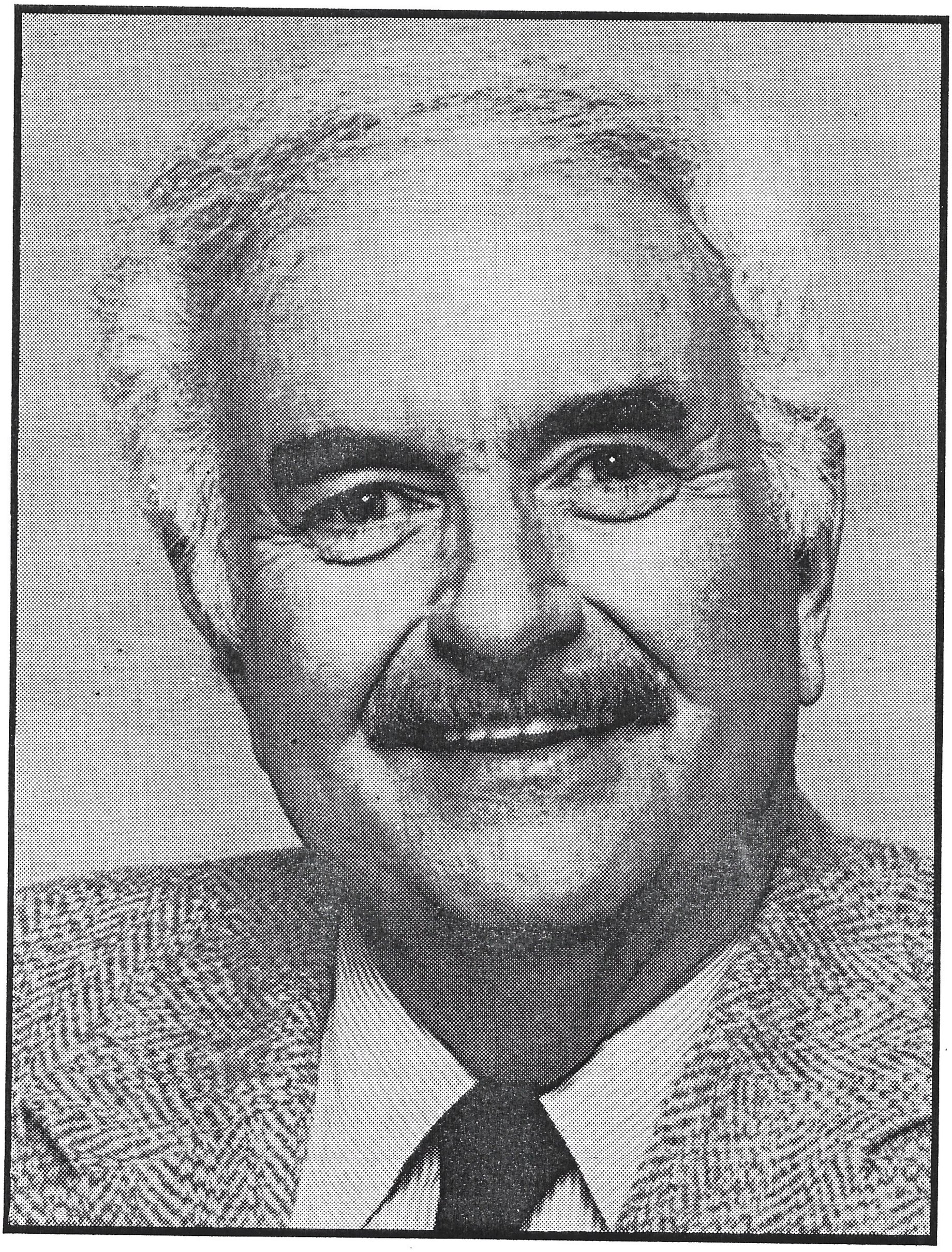

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Off The Shelf

Captain's Courageous

Bob Keeshan Speaks His Mind

by Danny McCue

"We're not shocked anymore." These are words that Bob Keeshan doesn't speak easily, and yet when talking about the plight of today's children, six million of whom in this country alone will go to bed hungry tonight, it is an idea he returns to frequently.

Throughout his forty-five years in children's television, a career that began with his creating the character Clarabell the Clown on the *Howdy Doody Show*, and which centerpiece is the incredible thirty-year run of *Captain Kangaroo* on CBS, Keeshan has stressed a 'whole child' approach to bettering the lot of very young people, believing that it is only once you've gotten someone's attention—in his case by entertaining them—that you can move on to the finer science of education.

His latest project, which will be available free of charge through pediatricians nationwide beginning this month, is a booklet called Captain Kangaroo's *Get Well Elephant*. It is intended to encourage parents to medicate their children wisely, while involving the child in his own treatment.

"Typically, children take medication for two or three days and they feel pretty good," says Keeshan, who was asked to write the pamphlet by the Upjohn company. "They think they're cured and go on about their way, and two or three weeks later they're sick again. That's why the book aims to educate parents particularly, because they supervise the distribution of medication to their children, and of course, to children themselves, so that they'll take the medication prescribed until we're sure to have beaten the infection."

Written in simple narrative form, easily understood by preschool and early school-age children, *Get Well Elephant* tells the story of Jenny, a young girl who has an ear infection that is being treated with antibiotics, and includes a calendar for children to mark off each day they take their medicine. Though he says that he was asked to write it by Upjohn in part because of his access to the media and his access to pediatricians (as an honorary fellow of the American Academy of Pediatrics) his real concern for the subject is evident in the pride he takes in his involvement, "because it goes a long way towards addressing a great need of pediatricians across the country."

A sentiment shared by Dr. W. M. Gooch, of the Primary Children's Medical Center in Salt Lake City, Utah, who was given the pamphlet for review and commentary prior to its publication. "Getting kids to take all of their medication, especially when it doesn't taste so great, has always been a problem for people in my profession. And while there have been books like this one, what's been missing in past is an identifiable character—particularly one with the appeal Captain Kangaroo has to the Baby Boom, parent generation."

He adds, "Bob is an incredibly strong advocate for children."

Which is one reason, no doubt, why Keeshan rejects the notion of resting on his laurels. "I don't look at life that way," he explains. "It's not a matter of 'I've done this, this month' and 'I've done this in the past twelve months, now what's left for me to do?' There's always another need that you need to address, new ideas that you feel can be useful in improving the lives of children. Right now, outside of television, there are many ways of reaching children, of reaching adults, in various circumstances. It may be speaking about child abuse yesterday in Dallas, Texas; child-care and child development earlier this week in Chicago...(I've spoken) about the effects of children's television at Nassau Community College. Of course, you can't talk about any one of those things without talking about children in general, and everything that comes into their lives."

He doesn't mince words when expressing his dissatisfaction with the way television treats children. It angers him because it wasn't always the way it is now.

"I don't think anybody can be very satisfied with it. There's virtually nothing on commercial television that delivers anything truly meaningful to children." The crux of the problem as Keeshan sees it, is that while broadcasters used to have to meet strict standards of what's in "the public interest," in 1984, under deregulation-minded chairman Mark Fowler, the Federal Communications Commission significantly loosened its restraints, in essence saying that competitive marketplace forces would keep stations knowledgeable of and responsive to their communities.

"Now they can go after the dollar, as demonstrated by the Ninja Turtles and programs of that nature, which turn out to be fairly violent because violence attracts people and they can build large audiences to whom advertisers can sell the Turtles and Turtle products. The content of a program shouldn't be a sales vehicle. Only in Public Television do we find programs like *Mister Roger's Neighborhood* and *Sesame Street* and *Reading Rainbow*, which start out addressing children's needs and end up satisfying bottom-line elements as well.

"So it's a very disheartening and frightening situation—especially because television is viewed today by more American families than at any time in history. And, of course, there have been radical changes in the American family over the last twenty years, particularly in terms of households where both parents work outside the home. Unfortunately, many parents think very little of using television as a babysitter—meaning, obviously, that they are not supervising the child's viewing—so what kids are watching is programming without any value, that's giving them nothing, that's inspiring them to do very little in the way of thinking day in and day out, and taking away from other supremely important aspects—the parent-child relationship, peer relationships—that a child, particularly a young child, needs to learn and grow."

> Big corporations don't really care about children, particularly very young children, unless they can sell them a toy or something of that nature.

Although Keeshan's track record would seem to speak for itself (besides being the Captain, he's also hosted *CBS Storybreak*, a weekly series which presented original adaptations of children's books, and wrote and appeared on a CBS radio program called *The Subject is Young People*) he was forced to end *Captain Kangaroo*'s post-CBS run on Public Television, after six seasons, because he couldn't find sufficient funding for it.

"Nobody gives a damn. There are a few foundations who support programming, but generally, the people who underwrite programs for Public Television are making a media buy. *The MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour*, for example, is underwritten by Pepsico and AT&T. Now, there's a great audience there, and a very attractive group of potential customers for those companies. They're not getting the full-blown commercials they get on commercial television, but they're not paying nearly the amount of money they do for that, and for what they spend, they get tremendous exposure night after night. Therefore *MacNeil/Lehrer* is a good media buy. Children are not a good media buy. Big corporations don't really care about children, particularly very young children, unless they can sell them a toy or something of that nature. So it's very difficult for a producer, any producer, to get new, quality programming on the air."

Nevertheless, Keeshan says he still believes in the power of television as a medium. At the same time, he's exploring other avenues to bringing positive messages and values into children's lives.

"We will be back on television, sometime in the next year, but of course we do use other media. We have videos which are available to parents who are thinking very seriously about the effect of television on their children and are tired of the commercials, tired of the violence, of the game shows, of the Oprahs and the Donahues that children are watching, where 'he's married to her but she's sleeping with his brother' and she's married to him, but he's sleeping with her sister.' Kids don't have the frame of reference of adults and think these are ordinary, standard values. They come very early on to accept these values, and most parents would be horrified by that notion, if only they'd think about it.

"Those who do think about it use their VCR, and they're able to go out and get tapes of Mister Rogers or Raffi or Captain Kangaroo. So, in effect, a thinking parent

BOOKS

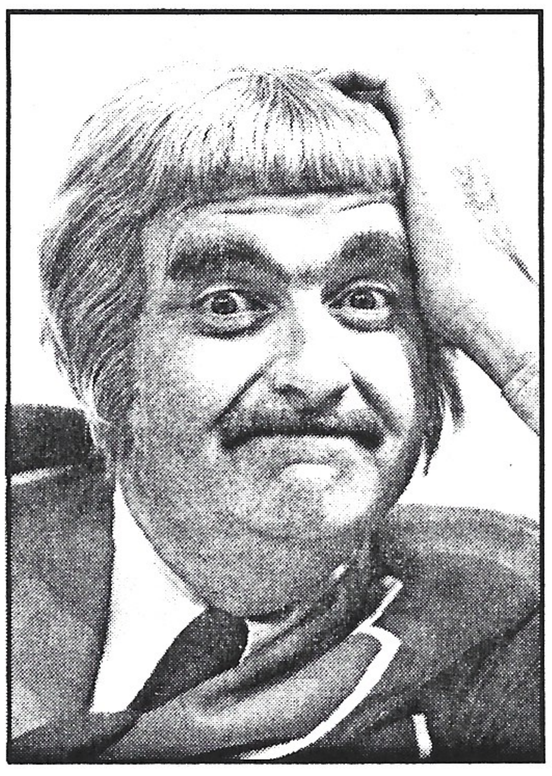
can become a programming manager, and he or she can control the content of the program the child is watching."

Bob Keeshan's new booklet, Captain Kangaroo's *Get Well Elephant*, encourages parents to medicate their children wisely.

Sensitive to the assumption of affluence in that statement, he continues by admitting that putting out educational videos is only part of the solution to what's ailing the country's kids. "It's true, [you're] not meeting the needs of the enormous number of American kids, one out of every five, who live below the poverty line. There are many single parent homes and families who are living on subsistent wages who certainly can't afford to buy or even rent videotapes or a VCR. That's why Public Television is a much more desirable medium to me, because it does have much more of a chance of reaching those kids."

With the conversation having begun to focus on family, values, and the media, talk turns to the 'family values aspect of the most recent presidential campaign.

"It was laughable. What comes first, the chicken or the egg. I think before you have family values, you have to have families. And unfortunately, an enormous number of kids don't. The kids that we get upset and angry about usually come from dysfunctional families—you're not going to find 'family values' in those families—and what about the single, hard-working woman, who is probably working two jobs and is still not earning a decent living, and is all alone raising a child or children? It's a tough life, and to expect to have her then sit down and give the same warmth and wonderful family values we had when



mommy was home all the time and daddy was well-paid, and we were living in an affluent society, that's ridiculous. You've got to give them jobs, you've got to give them the basic necessities in life, you've got to immunize the kids against childhood diseases and provide preventive care—16 million of our kids don't have health insurance, and the emergency room is the physician for many families because theys imply can't afford a private doctor. These are all things that get in the way of family values."

Complicating the situation, says Keeshan, is not only that the world has changed, but that the very values we're talking about—so often cast as hazy homilies to the 'good old days'—have changed along with it.

"Oh, I think values have changed a lot. I don't think children have changed, children are pretty much the same, but look at the condition of the country: every night millions of kids go to bed hungry and malnourished, there's violence in the street, domestic violence at home, and what happens to the children who are the victims of these things is they grow into adults and become the losers of the world...get involved in drugs and so forth...That doesn't happen because you're walking down the street and you spontaneously get a habit; it happens because you're ten years old and you feel lousy about yourself—you're getting kicked around by life, and this guy says, 'Try this, it'll make you feel better.' And you try it and you do feel good. That's when you've got another abuser. It's crazy. 'Just Say No' is way off the mark. That kid will just say, 'Get out of my face, lady. I feel better than I have in my entire life.'

"So what we've got to do is address the problems of why people abuse drugs. Why do people drink? Again it goes back to poverty and people who don't care.You know who gets taken care of in this country? It's the kids who are perceived as future tax payers and are expected to vote when they get older. That leaves the children born into poverty in a perpetual bind. But if we don't take care of these very basic problems in the first six or seven years of a child's life, we've lost them, and as a result, over time, the country's going to go down the drain.

"How are we going to compete against a unified Europe and the Asian rim when we're burdened with teenage pregnancy, with illiteracy, and with drug abuse? Without the workers and the managers to do it? These are economic issues, not just issues of compassion."

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